

BRAMLEY FETTERINGHAM

By HENRY NORMANBY.

The extreme narrowness of the boundary line between genius and madness has seldom been more clearly demonstrated than in the following powerfully written story by a writer whose work readers of the "Grand Magazine" have already had several opportunities of judging.



I was just after the publication of "The Cry of Silence" that I again met Bramley Fetteringham. I had lost sight of him previously for some years; in fact, my memory of him was vague, but it became sharpened and clear-cut when the common talk brought his remarkable individuality back to my recollection. I had not, I confess, much opinion of him in those early days; his was a too erratic temperament for my more staid and deeply set one, but we were always the best of friends. Hanson, of Caius, prophesied a future for him, but then Hanson prophesied a future for a great many people; in fact, he was so prodigal of careers that, at the end, he was left without one himself. In the case of Fetteringham, however, Hanson was right.

In common with the majority of critics, I was immensely struck with the depth and beauty of the work which heralded the author up the slopes of Parnassus. Its conception was so broad and lofty, and the execution was that of a master. I took pride to myself for my immediate recognition and appreciation of it.

Fetteringham received my congratulations very modestly, and passed the subject on with the remark, "The idea was my wife's—you should tackle her about it." I hoped I might soon have the pleasant opportunity of tackling her, and to that he replied, "Yes; I'm looking forward to it myself." At that time I was unacquainted with his chief and most curious characteristic, and naturally wondered what on earth he meant. Later, when I discovered it, I was also the possessor of other astounding facts concerning him which reduced the enigma to its elements.

"The Cry of Silence" undoubtedly was, and is, a great work. On it we built up Fetteringham's fame and arranged his future. The worst of it was it always remained his future, never becoming even his present, much less his past. We waited in a breathless sort of way for its successor, and when at length it came we were still more breathless. It left us staring at one another, each afraid to condemn and still more afraid to praise. In the higher regions there were murmurs, at which we took

heart ; and when Templeton, of the *Torch*, charitably described it as "hopelessly bad," we were sufficiently enlightened to consider the work praised overmuch.

I never got beyond the first chapter. It completely staggered me, and I hurried away to see how Fetteringham took the reviews. The *Reflector* was terribly severe, almost brutal I thought, and I rather hesitated before asking Fetteringham if he had seen it. I finally did so, and his reply amazed me even more than his book.

"Ah," he said, in a tone of supreme satisfaction, "it really is most gratifying ; my wife will be delighted—it's her example, you know."

I ardently hoped it was more than her example ; it would have relieved my mind to have known that it was entirely her own. I would not have envied her a single comma, but of course I couldn't say so, and on venturing to suggest that they might—didn't he think?—have toned it down a bit, I was bewildered by his prompt agreement.

"Yes ; it's a bit overdone ; a bit too full—I call it flattery—but it's good, quite devilish good."

Personally I thought it quite devilish bad, but I did not give expression to my opinion, and although I always liked to hear a man praise his own work (I invariably do mine) it occurred to me how thoroughly he must have married for his wife to have given him such inspiration. In that, as will be seen, I did her an injustice.

I did not see Fetteringham again until the autumn of the same year, when we met at the Keith-Willesdens. He was in excellent form there and talked well, even brilliantly, after dinner. We returned to town together, and he insisted on my accompanying him to what he called his "den." I held back a bit, fearing this meant an introduction to his wife, the inspirer of that devilish good work which I was trying to forget. I felt, I imagine, much as the prophet of leonine fame did in his somewhat less trying predicament, and it was distinctly a relief to me when Fetteringham apologised for his wife's absence. To be sure, he went on to say that it was, perhaps, as well, because he wanted to show me his latest work. He did not explain why her presence would interfere with the exhibition, but presently produced the manuscript.

I have it in my possession at the present time, and occasionally, when I think I require any vigorous mental exercise, I endeavour to discover the meaning of any one sentence. It might as well have been written in the most murdered of all dead languages so far as I am concerned, and I read it with unalloyed amazement.

As I did so Fetteringham kept walking about the room, stopping every few minutes to see how I was progressing. When the last sheet was turned over, he drew his chair close to mine and waited for the verdict.

I laid the extraordinary production down and raised my eyes to his. He looked inquiringly at me, and I took the plunge boldly.

"My dear fellow, what is it all about?"

"That's just it," he answered with a delighted smile ; "that's the very thing."

"What's the very thing?" I went on.

"Why, what it's all about." Then, in a mysterious whisper he added, "I haven't shown it to my wife; I haven't told her—but she'll know, she'll certainly know."

I confess to considerable dullness in that I didn't know. Later, to my sorrow, I knew utterly. His wife, he informed me, would be in presently, and as he seemed to mention the fact as a reason for my departure, I bade my friend good-night and returned to my chambers.

Several months elapsed before I again met the author of "The Cry of Silence." During that time his genius had been marching in another direction.

At the Academy private view I came across Halton, who said he was looking for young masters. His pretty sister was there also, apparently pursuing the same quest, with perhaps a greater avidity, and certainly with much more likelihood of success. She asked me immediately if I had seen it.

"It?" I interrogated.

"The Picture," she explained.

I said I had seen them, or rather some of them.

"Oh! I mean the masterpiece," she went on.

"Forgive me, I didn't know you were exhibiting," I protested. To which she rejoined, with that smile of hers which always makes me warm:

"You silly man, of course I'm not. I mean Mrs. Fetteringham's work, 'Lucifer.'"

"I didn't know Mrs. Fetteringham painted," I answered in much surprise.

"Ah, well; come and see."

Her invitation was, of course, a command, and I joyfully allowed her to pilot me amongst the crowd which exhaled Art and perfume in about equal proportions. After much danger, if not of shipwreck, at least of train-wreck, we brought up in front of Mrs. Fetteringham's canvas. The greatest tribute to it was the silence of the onlookers. It was indeed magnificent. I gazed at it in envious awe. Never before had I been in such danger of a personal acquaintance with the Arch-Enemy of Mankind, and I trust I may never come more truly into that austere disquieting presence.

We were standing spellbound before the picture when someone touched me on the shoulder. I turned and discovered Fetteringham.

"It's my wife," he whispered somewhat ambiguously; "isn't it stupendous? Why, you can see damnation all over it. I didn't know she had done it—she never told me, upon my soul."

I left Netta Halton to her quest of juvenile genius, and went away with Fetteringham. Being entirely anxious to see to the bottom of all this, I invited myself to lunch with him—or, rather, with his elusive wife. On the way to the house he informed me that he himself was at work on a picture, and I received the fact with the surprise and gratification due to it.

"My wife has been teaching me," he explained, "giving me a few ideas, you know. She's immensely pleased with it—oh! immensely; but

it doesn't come anywhere near hers—not to be looked at with the same eye.”

I hoped that the prospective view of the picture would not necessitate any radical change in my own organs of vision, and laughingly told him so.

“Oh! but it makes a difference which eye you look at it with; sometimes you can see better with both eyes shut—that's the way I always look at my wife's pictures.”

I agreed that some pictures were better studied in that negative manner, while I wondered a little at the utter gravity of his reply.

“I can see twenty times as much when I shut my eyes. That's how my wife always paints. The picture you've just seen is only a trial—an experiment. I'm taking you to see the real thing now. It isn't quite finished, but mine is.”

I suitably acknowledged my indebtedness, and followed it up by asking him if Mrs. Fetteringham were at work on it then.

“Why, no; she's abroad—in Italy, doing something in marble. I'm going to take lessons in that too.” Before I could utter my congratulations on the fine gifts she was bringing him we arrived at the house, and my curiosity strove with my wonder as he led the way to the kitchen.

Standing on the range (in which there was no fire) was a large new canvas; it was unspoiled by paint, being quite white and clean. Fetteringham led me up to it, and, taking hold of my arm, said very impressively:

“You can't see it with both eyes, close the left—it's her idea, isn't it great?”

I thought it a joke, and considered it rather a poor specimen of artistic humour; in fact, I was about to tell him so, when I noticed that his eyes were positively dancing with excitement; they flashed with a curious abnormal light, and he trembled as though stricken with ague.

Like a lightning flash the realisation of his insanity came upon me and made me speechless. I was sick with the new sense of it. The magnitude of the calamity was too great to be grasped and measured at once. I gazed at him in profound dismay.

“Yes, that's right,” he whispered; “one really cannot speak of it; but it speaks to me—it shouts in my ears. I couldn't have done it if she hadn't stood at my side all the time. Oh, she is wonderful, wonderful!”

Seeing that he wished me to say something, and in order to calm his intense excitement, I assured him that it was a most remarkable work, and having gazed our fill at the picture that wasn't there he presently led me upstairs to the drawing-room, again apologising for the absence of his wife.

“This, as you see,” he remarked, “is not quite finished. It's only a study—my wife doesn't think much of it; but, my dear fellow, it's just *the thing*. It's truth in colours. I watched her do it; she just breathed on the canvas and it came.”

As he spoke he removed the cover from a small canvas which stood on a chair and held up a picture for my inspection. The revelation nearly took my breath away. It was the face of a woman done in oils, and the

serene beauty of the work—the sweetness and grace of it—came upon me like a benediction. Had I been alone I think I should have wept.

Of course I praised it; but, good heavens! mere praise was inadequate. Such Art demanded servitude, worship—one could almost, without shame, have prayed to it.

I sometimes think that even the fate that befell the painter was cheaply purchased at the price of his work.

"You don't know her?" Fetteringham asked; "but you will. That's my wife—painted by herself. She's better than that; I call her an improvement on Nature; you shall see."

His previous excitement had passed off and he spoke quite rationally. My heart sank as I looked at him—so gifted, so generous, so appallingly doomed—and a great pity softened my voice as I answered.

"Well, old fellow, I shall be delighted to see her. If she's only half as magnificent as her picture she'll do. Now, a truce to Art, come for a walk with me."

"You must come and see her," he said, as we shook hands at parting. "Come soon; she's worth it—oh, she's worth it."

And that was the last I saw of Bramley Fetteringham as a man with a soul.

His invitation to call soon was accepted to the letter, and I called the next day in the hope of inducing him to go away with me for a month or two. In answer to my inquiry the servant informed me that Mr. Fetteringham had left town at half-past nine that morning. He was not expected back for some weeks and had left no instructions as to his letters. The servant believed he had gone abroad, if he might take that liberty. Not being quite sure what liberty it was that James desired, I asked if Mrs. Fetteringham were at home, to which the man replied that Mrs. Fetteringham died six months ago.

"Died? Why, I had no idea he had been married so long."

"Mr. Fetteringham's mother, sir," James corrected. "Mr. Fetteringham isn't married. I hope, sir, if I may take the liberty, that he won't."

Long service absolved James of impertinence, but I refrained from soliciting any further confidences and went away to consult my old friend Spencer Wayling, who, after much vicissitude, had attained Harley-street. He gave me a good deal of valuable time, but no comfort or assistance; and, deeply grieved and depressed, I also left town for a few weeks.

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It may be a lack of appreciation on my part, but it seems to me that the Hanging Committee really think too much of my work; they have too high an opinion of it, placing it so far above the work of others. It has been my aim for some years to try to obtain a less exalted position for my representations than has been accorded them hitherto, and to that end I was striving on my return to town, when Fetteringham came in. He made no reply to my greeting, but walked straight up to the easel and subjected the canvas to a close scrutiny; then, without a word, he took up the

brush and began to paint. He worked in a rapid and masterly manner, and with every stroke of the brush my picture advanced towards immortality. In a few minutes it was completely transformed, the figures stood out with an aggressive boldness and the light of life streamed from them. It was tremendous, incredible, the wonderful manifestation of sublime genius.

For more than two hours Fetteringham worked steadily at my canvas ; then he stepped back a few paces to contemplate the result. Neither of us had spoken a word. I had watched him with a profound admiration, tintured, I admit, with envy, but I hope and indeed believe my chief thought was thankfulness at his supreme return to sanity. As he stood silently considering his great accomplishment I noticed a change in the expression of his face. The look of high intelligence and concentration passed off, and was replaced by a curiously pathetic tenderness. Turning to me with a smile of ineffable sweetness he said, " Marjorie, my dearest ; you *can* paint."

He believed me to be his wife !

I felt quite sick and a little faint as I realised the enormity of the disaster that had come upon him. I did not know that an even greater tragedy was about to befall. After a futile attempt to convince him of his error, an endeavour which distressed and excited him, I accompanied the lost genius back to his house. He preceded me to the drawing-room, where a young and startlingly beautiful woman came forward to meet us. She turned to Fetteringham with a look of inquiry, and I recognised instantly her perfect likeness to the divine picture he had shown me in that same room. Fetteringham stood still, gazing from one to the other of us. He seemed to be trying to collect his thoughts, trying to see things once more with the eye of truth. The cup of tragedy was full to overflowing.

Fetteringham broke the brief silence by turning to me and saying, " Marjorie, I want you to know Everden—my old friend Jack ; I want you to like him." To the wondering girl he said, " Jack, old chap ; this is my wife ; ask her why she married me." Before either of us could answer he walked towards the door, saying as he passed out :

" Well, talk it over—just talk it over."

She had not the slightest suspicion of his disorder of mind, and she had married him that very day.

Fetteringham lived only a fortnight longer, and never again recognised his wife, nor spoke with the voice of understanding. His diary and papers cleared up to a great extent the mystery which enshrouded him. His love for, and adoration of, the beautiful woman he married was so magnificently great that he attributed the work of his own genius to her, merging and losing his individuality in hers. It was in this noble belief that he accomplished those immortal triumphs which were his.

It may be that hereafter, in the light of a wider and deeper knowledge, these strange things shall be made clear to us ; perhaps, even now, he was wiser than we.